

# Helping Writers Create Explicit Texts: From Crisis Calls to Classrooms

Carolyn Cutler

In the world of crisis hot lines, one cannot afford to allow a “text,” the content of a caller’s concern, to remain implicit. Consider the call made to a suicide hot line by a woman who was distraught. She said, “My washing machine has broken down and I don’t know what to do.” (This call was made thirty years ago by someone who is now fine).

The caller’s explicit text appears to have nothing to do with the purpose of the hot line. And while crisis lines are prey to exploitive people, usually those calls are explicitly obscene.

A well-trained crisis worker assumes that a distraught person calling a suicide hot line is contemplating something drastic. Further, because the person has called the hotline, he or she probably does not want to commit suicide. The crisis line worker also knows about deflection. People focus on a tangential aspect of a problem because they feel embarrassed and uncomfortable talking with a stranger or they are just edging out of denial about a problem. They present a small part of the problem in order to test the stranger’s reaction.

While the worker knows that the washing machine is deflection, he or she also knows that the caller is fragile and needs support. It would be inappropriate to say, “You’re not concerned about your washing machine. Quit wasting my time and tell me what is really going on.”

The following chart outlines explicit and im-

plicit content and the avenues for response:

Explicit	Implicit	Avenues for Response
“My washing machine is broken”	Possible deflection	Consequences of washing machine being broken?
“I don’t know what to do.”	Desire for help	Offer information and alternatives
Distraught tone of voice	Fear	Reflect feelings, offer support.
Phone call made to suicide hotline	Possible suicidal ideation or plans	Check for suicidal ideation during conversation

Based on the avenues for response, the crisis line worker might say: “You sound upset. I’d like to help you so that you won’t feel so afraid. Can you tell me more about what happened with the washing machine?” Such a response offers support, indicates that the worker has listened carefully, and asks for clarification in a non-threatening way.

The crisis line worker is laying the groundwork for a relationship that will allow the caller to make her “text” more explicit. As this relationship is built, the caller reveals that she is afraid her husband will beat her because the machine has broken. Knowing this, the worker can check for the caller’s ideas about suicide and can offer alternatives such as battered women’s programs.

## Explicit and Implicit Written Texts

Perhaps it is not outlandish to suggest that struggling writing students are in the same position as a battered woman calling a suicide hotline about a broken washing machine. The writers I have worked with as a teacher and developmental editor have strong feelings about their texts. Particularly when high stakes are riding on the qual-

ity of these texts, they feel distraught. Since their texts consist of their own language and ideas, their fears about their texts are fears about themselves. If their texts are not good enough, they think, this is because they are not good enough. The late night phone calls I have received from “my” writers and the tears shed during our conferences attest to the fears these writers feel about their texts and themselves.

While writers in the classroom might not go to the lengths of hiring a developmental editor, they likely feel a strong connection to their texts. Particularly in classrooms where writers are encouraged to write about things that are important, writers may see their texts as a part of their flesh and blood submitted to the judgment of someone else.

Yet like the crisis caller, writers may deflect, focusing on insignificant details. For example, in one of her college essays (in Miller, 1949), Gertrude Stein wrote about a girl who experiences a confusing event: a man in a large crowd presses close to her. Even after the crowd abates, the girl remains pressed close to him, seemingly of her own volition. Responding to Stein’s essay, the professor of the class noted that Stein took a long time recounting details that led up to the main event. Stein’s reasons for deflection are clear to any 21st century reader (even if not to a male reader in 1894). She lingers over early details as a way of putting off the hard writing. To her credit, she writes through the difficulty. But her text shows traces of her deflection process.

The implicit aspects of texts, like the content of crisis calls, can be varied. Some writers present a jumble of thoughts, which may suggest implicit ideas that conflict. It could also be the result of intuitive leaps made by the writer. One student I worked with gave me a draft that leapt from one thought to another in a confusing mass of ideas. I realized that the student was working with complex relations between several ideas. She was struggling with how to

make her ideas, their history, and their relationships explicit. The best solution she had found was a leap-frog approach. She knew this was not a good way of writing, but she also knew no alternative.

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**Another common problem I see in my writers is inflated prose, usually sprinkled with mistaken usages, particularly malapropisms.**

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This is a problem when writers are working within the academic tradition. The writer is attempting to use a voice of authority but is also, perhaps, fearful that he or she cannot truly fill the large shoes of authority. This kind of writing is a smoke screen the writer throws up around what he or she may feel are significant inadequacies. Never mind that in conversations this writer has wonderful ideas. These ideas are masked by a prose that would be laughable if the writer were not in such distress.

Sometimes a normally competent writer will turn in a piece of writing that has problems with surface features. Perhaps the spelling is really bad and the person clearly has not run the writing through a spell checker. Or there is some problem with grammar and/or punctuation. If the writer is normally good at these features, you can bet there is something that is implicit to the text. I find that when writers feel discouraged about their work, they are careless with the details. As they gain confidence in their work, they are able to do more with the surface features.

Then there are writers who are so close to their subject matter that they cannot “see” the details of their writing. I once read a student’s poem written in she referred to herself as “you” and her father as “he.” Her father had recently died and while the process of writing the poem was an important commemoration of him, the subject matter was so close that the pronouns kept slipping from self as “you” and father as “he” to self as “I” and father as “you.” Another client of

mine was writing about the changes she was making in her work. She was so close to those changes that her sentences would come out in idiosyncratic, confusing ways.

As with the crisis calls, we can make a chart for writing:

Explicit	Implicit
focus on details that seem tangential	Deflection? Possible emotional difficulty or difficulty finding words.
jumbled ideas	Struggling with what the ideas are Possible intuitive leaps
inflated prose with malapropisms	Desire for authoritative voice, to be viewed as knowledgeable, no confidence
problems with surface features (bad spelling, grammar, etc.)	Energy is focused on some other part of the writing (e.g., subject matter) such that there is no energy for self-editing.
inconsistencies in writing such as in tense or in terms of the pronouns being used	Writer is so close that the writing reflects the "real" relations as well as the attempt at fictionalizing them.

**Responding to Writers in Crisis**

How do we respond to these writers in ways that help them create more effective texts?

The last thing a struggling writer needs is judgment. Like crisis line callers, struggling writers need advocates. They need good listeners who are supportive, help them clarify their texts, offer alternatives, and do all of this with a recognition of the fragility of the writer.

*Good Listening*

Before I became a writing teacher, I spent seven years responding to crisis calls, initially on a rape crisis line as a volunteer and later as an employee on two battered women’s shelter crisis lines. I have found that the listening skills I learned as a volunteer help me as I work with writers.

I was trained to do “Active Listening,” which has two parts: listening and reflecting. Active listeners hear more than just the words a person says. They listen for tone of voice, word choice, and what the person is NOT saying. If they have the luxury of being in the physical presence of the person (something we didn’t have on the crisis line), they watch the person’s body language—their posture, gestures, and facial expressions. They listen for explicit content, implicit content, emotional content, and the places where there

might be conflict between these things.

The second part of active listening is the response, which should reflect the care taken in listening; it is NOT a simplistic parroting back of content. The response is cast in tentative terms that allow the person to correct the listener. The listener can add other observations, as in: “You are concerned about xxxxxxxx. I’m aware that your voice is shaking and I wonder if you are feeling afraid.”

That person might respond, “No, I’m not afraid. I’m really angry.” That is a clarification based on the tentative nature of the observations. It is also possible that the person denies feeling anything that would make his or her voice shake—and that is information about how open that person is to feelings of vulnerability or how open that person is to sharing with the listener.

Active listening can be used in two ways with writers. It can be part of writing conferences. But it can also be used in one’s written response to a written text. A text can be read not only for its explicit content but also by noting the apparent emotional content it reflects, by noting the word choices a writer has used. Consider these two possible texts: “After a long illness, his heartbeat grew fainter and fainter. At some point, I never knew when, his breath stopped. He had passed on,” and “He got sick and then he died.” These texts represent two different emotional stances in relation to the person who died. Thinking through some of the alternative ways in which the writer could have expressed the same thing will give you a sense of the emotional basis on which the writer made certain decisions about the text.

*Clarification*

Active listening allows teachers to help writers make texts more explicit. Through active listening (and active written response based on active listening) teachers can offer interpretations of the writer’s meaning. If these interpretations are offered tentatively (not “Aha, you REALLY mean this” which is judgment), the writer can correct the interpretation until it is a reasonable repre-



sentation of his or her meaning. Then the teacher can help the writer express that clarified meaning on paper.

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Sometimes clarification requires that the teacher query the writer. Another crisis counseling technique can help the teacher keep queries from becoming the "third degree."

Because the teacher has authority over students, the process of questioning can place students in a position of defensiveness. This is especially true when the subject matter is something emotionally close to the student. Students who feel themselves having to defend themselves against the teacher's authority can shut down and become mute on a subject. Or they may agree with whatever the teacher says or say whatever they think the teacher wants to hear. In any case, the student is not receiving help with making his or her writing clearer.

There is a counseling technique of asking questions that can help to get around the problem of authority. Here is what to keep in mind.

1. Ask open-ended questions rather than "yes/no" questions.
2. Ask passive-voice "how" questions instead of "why" questions.
3. Offer information about how accepting you will be of several possible responses.

If you ask "yes/no" questions, you will get one-word answers or just nods or shakes of the head. Broaden the question. Instead of "Did you tell your Dad goodbye before he died?" you could say, "What went on between you and your Dad before he died?" This allows the student to express things that you did not ask for but which are important.

"Why" questions suggest that you are questioning the person's motives and decisions. Every "why" question can be turned into a passive

voice "how" question: "Why did you get into a fight with your brother?" becomes "How was it you and brother got into a fight?" "Why didn't you just get on the bus?" becomes "How was it that you didn't get on the bus?" The passive-voice "how" questions do not assign blame because passive voice masks culpability. Instead, they are even-handed questions that allow the respondent to express situations that are more complex.

Finally, before you ask a question, you might anticipate responses and your accepting reactions to them: "I know that it is hard to deal with family. It's not a matter of blaming one person or another—it's more complex than that. I remember getting into a conflict with my brother and I was frustrated that my mom could not understand why he was so irritating to me. So, can you tell me, how is it that you and your brother got into conflict?"

### *Offer Alternatives*

One of the things we were told in crisis line training classes is that your job is not to "fix" things or to offer endless reams of advice. Instead, a crisis line counselor offers alternatives from which the caller can choose.

One of the most difficult phone calls I ever had on a crisis line was at a battered women's shelter. For the first ten minutes of the call, the person was silent. The only explicit "text" I had to go on was the fact that the person had called a battered women's shelter crisis line.

I began with an active listening process that acknowledged that many people who call the crisis line feel scared and reluctant to talk about their situation. After a minimal response, I talked about how sometimes after people talk about their situation they feel better. Again I got a minimal response. But the person did not hang up, so I knew she was waiting for me to get onto the right track and she might even be trusting that I would do so. I talked about how it is scary to be in a battering relationship. Again, a minimal response, that let me know she was with me even if I hadn't found a way to let her open up. I told stories about how women had come into the shelter and put their

lives together. Again, she responded minimally. But she was still on the line.

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Then I started to feel desperate. I had to keep trying, but I was running out of options. So, I said, "Sometimes shelters help people just start completely over. Sometimes women come into a shelter and transfer to a shelter somewhere else and start their lives over." BINGO! She began to talk. We had a long conversation and she was able to let out pent-up feelings as well as consider her options. At the end of the conversation, she knew there was someone in the world who would hang in with her, who believed her, and who could give her some options. It was clear from her voice that she felt relief by the end of the conversation.

The problem that people on the crisis line and struggling writers face is a lack of options. The woman with the broken washing machine did not feel she had many options other than suicide when it came to dealing with her abusive husband. The silent crisis caller was in the same position. Simply offering options, resources, and information goes a long way toward helping the person in crisis both feel better and take control of her life.

Likewise, struggling writers do not feel they have very many options about what or how they write. They may be aware of the inadequacies of their writing, and they may be beside themselves with distress about their inability to address or change the inadequacies.

Options about text may range from rewriting in a new genre, seeking editing help from a fellow student (such that the writer receive "scaffolding" in that process), drawing a diagram or picture to represent the ideas and their relationships, allowing the writer to verbally dictate ideas to someone else, "telling" the ideas in the writer's own

words as if talking to a friend, putting the text aside for awhile and coming back to it later, or writing about the same event in a freewrite or a series of freewrites until the person feels emptied of pent-up feelings. Options also include seeing function of writing differently, such as removing some of the stakes attached to the writing (e.g., telling the writer that s/he can draft freely without worrying about a grade on a particular piece), or talking about how writing is a struggle for many people but that does not mean that people who struggle with writing are bad or stupid. It might mean sharing information about famous writers who have struggled or even sharing about your own writing struggles.

It is at the level of dealing with options that the teacher needs to be the most creative. It may mean putting aside rubrics or other standard writing practices and creating a new procedure to address this writer's concerns. It may mean giving emotional support such that the writer knows you will not reject him or her as a person or helping the writer to understand that you recognize his or her value even while you are trying to help the writer improve his or her text.

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**The most important part of helping a struggling writer is to provide options and then let the writer choose.**

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*Fragility of the Writer*

Recognizing the fragility of the writer means addressing their writing gently, finding ways of keeping defensiveness at bay, offering options, and letting the student know that you want to help them become effective writers. You are a writing advocate. But sometimes the recognition of fragility goes beyond writing issues. Sometimes you must give up the role of teacher and take on the role of empathetic listener in order to address student concerns that are evident in writing.

One student I had in a college writing course turned in a piece that had several voices in it and an indirect plea for help: "I have a friend who is

having problems . . .” I became concerned that this student had a significant mental health issue. I did not do ANYTHING with text structure, voice, or surface features. Instead, I did what I would have done on the crisis line. I maintained the fiction of the friend, responded to the emotional content, and suggested that I had resources that could help the friend. I invited her to talk with me about those resources.

We talked at her portfolio conference. I told the student about people I knew who had gone through similar problems as the ones expressed in the writing, and the help they had received. I gave her the name of a counselor whom I knew to be helpful. A year later I saw this student again. She was in counseling, and she was appreciative of the fact that I was able to be part of her stepping on the road to recovery.

### **Are You A Teacher or a Counselor?**

It seems overwhelming to consider adding counseling techniques to teaching repertoire. And it is truly overwhelming to do this when you teach hundreds of students, many of whom have significant emotional issues to deal with. Yet with the emphasis on authentic writing, present even in writing prompts on standardized tests,

you are likely to become aware of emotional issues of the students in your classroom. Counseling skills help you address these problems when they arise. Furthermore, when writing is close to the person and they create a text that has more implicit than explicit features, judgmental responses do not help the student to become a more effective writer, to turn the power of emotion into powerful writing. Instead, judgment might contribute to the writer shutting down completely.

Judicious use of these skills in addition to teaching skills can help you reach students. They contribute to your ability to respond to writing such that your classroom becomes a place in which students can try out their responses to the complexities of the world in which they live. What better reason for writing than that?

### **Works Cited**

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### **About the Author**

Carolyn Cutler is adjunct faculty at Capital University, Columbus, Ohio.